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ABSTRACT

The failure of history textbooks to teach about ordinary people and events is examined, and what teachers can do to overcome this shortcoming of texts is discussed. History texts emphasize political history, wars, battles, and chronicles of great persons and events of the past. Scant attention is paid to the lives of ordinary men and women. This is not to say that no books tell the story of ordinary people; there are some, e.g., Traill's "Social England" and Davis' "Life on a Medieval Barony." Recent historiographies suggest that wars, battles, and leaders are more like punctuation marks than ways to organize thinking about the main currents that energize events. Students need to be exposed to real history, a panorama of slowly developing civilizations, affected only peripherally by great events, but really created by geography, trade, climate, technology, marine development, agriculture, human differences and likenesses, and groupings. Teachers should read historians whose subjects direct attention to the mass of small figures at the bottom of history rather than the small cluster at the top. Classroom activities should be designed based on these readings. Teachers should assign students supplementary readings about ordinary folk. (RM)

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SHOULD HISTORY TEXTBOOKS REMEMBER DIFFERENTLY?

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History teachers look at history texts more critically since publication of Frances Fitzgerald's America Revised. Her critique has a seminal effect, echoing in thought, raising new questions with each new answer. And as we read more history, new questions find more and better answers. We may have been misled concerning what history was supposed to be about by Herodotus, the great Greek "Father of History," whose masterwork told the story of the Persian invasion of Greece. Have we missed some of his historiographic message? Although his intent was to tell of war, attention to what this progenitor of all historians really did reveals a design quite different from the battle-and-hero patterns of his successors. Six books, forming two thirds of his composition, deal with geographical settings, antique legends, manners and customs, products of nature, climate, monuments, colonies, commerce, legislation, and religious tenets, in a flourishing abundance of episodic detail.

More likely, we have followed the successor of Herodotus, Thucydides, who wrote of the Peloponnesian War. True, he writes of his own times for an audience that knew the intimate details of daily life, as readers of Herodotus did not, because Herodotus wrote of events thirty years before his birth. Thucydides, on the other hand, mentions the great buildings, the Propylaea and

the Parthenon, for instance, only as notable for having consumed resources that could have helped to finance war.

So it is the method of Thucydides not the model of Herodotus, that our texts have followed. After many pages of political history, wars, battles, and chronicles of great persons and events of the past, history texts add a page of two of cultural and sociological comment. But they make political events synonymous with the word history. If other events are chronicled, reference is to "the history of..." But when the word history alone is used, it is meant to refer to political events and those involved in them. Textbooks divide historic time into periods between wars and conquests. Text historians have made the fall of Rome so much like a single event that few of our high school students understand that the real decline of the Roman Empire took place during a time longer than the existence of their own country. Rapid, dramatic, and ephemeral events define the historical epoch. From these arise the history of the history books -- the conventional history of politics, diplomacy, battles, the dates we memorize and recite and put into timelines, the speeches and assassinations, the events which we are told are "history in the making" and the people who, we are told, are "legends in their own time." But have these events not already been shaped by events on lower levels, the unseen forces in the lives of ordinary men?

Historians are not alone in this emphasis. For most of recorded time, only events concerning the great and near great were important enough to be used in drama or recorded in art. By definition, tragedy could happen only to those of noble stature; in the lives of lesser persons grievous events were only pathetic. Like dramatists, painters and artists were preoccupied with lives of the elevated and the events of war and politics. Not until the late eighteenth century did painters paint common persons and their surroundings.

This is not to say that no books told the story of ordinary people, through whose lives great ones moved to their battles and thrones in ways that more often damaged than blessed their fellows. There was that great old study of ordinary life, H. D. Traill's Social England. There was C. E. Robinson's Everyday Life in Ancient Greece and a similar book about Ancient Rome. There was the delightful little classic, Life on a Medieval Barony by Davis. But these have been rarely used for collateral reading in history classes. Instead, we direct students to read Creasy's Fifteen Decisive Battles. However, of late, European historiographers and historians inspire us to look at lives of the many instead of lives of the few in ascertaining what history really is. Recent historiographers suggest that wars, battles, and leaders are more like punctuation marks than ways to organize our thinking about the main currents that energize events.

One such writer is Philippe Aries, who investigated and reported the history of childhood. Another important work is Fernand Braudel's Structures of Everyday Life. A fascinating new book by Lillian Schlissel, Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey, uses diaries and letters of 103 women to tell how, on those 2400 mile wagon-train journeys they kept their families healthy, well-fed, clean and together. Their daily routines contrast and compare with women's work today: baking; washing; cooking; child care; scrounging for berries, herbs, and roots; pitching tents; packing and unpacking; and tending the sick. And this book, too, is eminently readable.

Great events often affect only a thin top crust of lives, while a huge number of ordinary folk went on relatively untouched by supposed shakers of the earth. What was shaken was more often a small dimension on the surface of life, not its depths. What will students find in this deeper dimension of history? First there is man as a product of the forces around him: weather, water, birthrate, diseases, harvest, population, health, longevity, and diet. Details of life as they impinged on the lives of the great are sometimes more interesting and often more significant than events that have been selected to loom large. At the battle of Marengo, why was there so little food for Napoleon's army that his chef had to improvise the wonderful dish that came to be known as Chicken Marengo? What were ordinary soldiers

eating as Napoleon's chef prepared their general's elaborate diet?

The real stuffs of history are the business letters, bills of lading, records of births and deaths, corn prices, ship tonnages, cannon power, olive harvests, medical recipes, clothes, furniture, horsepower, cash boxes, street sewers, and insurance rates. Instead of divisions of historical time in terms of wars, and decisive battles, instead of historical time defined by sharp political confrontations, real history is a panorama of slowly developing civilization, affected only peripherally by great events, but really created, uncreated, and recreated by geography, trade, climate, technology, marine development, agriculture, human differences and likenesses, and groupings. Ambitions of the great, the pageant of their battles and marriages, are ripples across the large tide of human life, which is created and sustained through lives of ordinary men and women.

These great tides are created by slow-changing conditions of landscape, the fluctuations of boom and recession, the growth of military power, the decline of cities, the expansion of new trades and commodities, weather, population, disease, transport, communication, and the available materials of domestic existence and pleasure. But these are so everpresent that they pass unnoticed. They are taken for granted and ignored by the textbook historian.

In a vision of history that gives first place to the manner of life of ordinary men, we learn of their

food and drink, transport, technologies, money and banking systems, their great cities and how people lived in them and traveled between them. Changes in daily habits are more impressive than battles to a student who realizes that only in the last three centuries did his ancestors use forks, glass windows, chairs, and handkerchiefs and eat sugar, pepper, tomatoes and potatoes. Let us fill history texts with pictures, not of Napoleon on a steed rampant, as he is on the ad for Courvoisier, but with kitchen scenes, with graphs delineating the cost of living index in a given year, with speed maps of postal times across the globe.

And how shall we assess the interdependencies of historical man? What of the dependencies of that man on his crops for his culture? Because maize in Central America required only fifty days of work from tillage to harvest, villagers could be required to spend the rest of their time erecting huge pyramids. Without maize the Aztec pyramids would never have existed. On the other hand, wheat based societies produced a decentralized village life and a market economy, which linked political events to the production of bread. Rice populations of China engendered high populations and the strict social discipline of rigid authority.

Population density and social development are closely linked. A society seemed to become a civilization when there were about 30 people per square kilometer. In 1600 Italy had 40; France, 34; Germany, 28; China, 20; and

Norway, 1. These numbers measure the social sophistication of the late Renaissance. The question immediately arises, "Does the second threshold of civilization pass when these factors are multiplied by a factor of 10 or more, as they are in great cities today?"

Let us also trace the rise of values systems. In addition to understanding that routines of daily life are as important as momentous doings of kings, we must show feelings that ride in man's consciousness above these routines. These feelings define needs and ways of living which unite us with the people of our past and show our likenesses instead of our differences. Here are religious hopes, family affections, ideals, popular dreams, aspirations, education, prayer, marriage, body language, love, sex, magic, morality, and the tales and legends we tell. This historical vision transcends the vision of the all important nation state and its leaders in war, battles, and politics, which have divided and destroyed men.

Writers of these things have little affected history texts. What can we do about it? History teachers themselves can read historians whose subjects direct attention to the mass of small figures at the bottom of history rather than the small cluster at the top. The popular aphorism which says that one who knows no history is bound to repeat it should perhaps be translated into a statement that those who take for granted the present will never understand it. Perspective that allows

us to look realistically at the present requires us to get outside it into another reality. A knowledge of the past gives this great gift, the ability to understand what we see of the present. Barbara Tuchman calls the past a "distant mirror."

For students in this age of the common man, the texture of daily life in the past, its sparkle, its gaunt strangeness, its otherness, its unexpectedness makes him look more closely at norms and assumptions of his own times. What an awareness of ourselves it gives us to look at the meager household possessions in recreated cottages of early settlers, which it is the fashion for historical societies to display in museums.

Students enjoy looking at beards and facial hair as a method of indicating social attitudes and status. What student would not like to know that in 1559 a king had to write a letter of rebuke to a parish that rejected a bishop because his beard indicated that he had ideas too modern for them to accept. Students like to know that table manners had to wait on the invention of table instruments after 1600, that the chair existed for centuries as an instrument of ceremony before it became an instrument of comfort. And what a mirror is provided when we see that rulers of Venice spent more than the city's annual income on military stockpiling when there was no war but when its power was declining!

When did men first enlarge their value system to include personal privacy and comfort? Until the eighteenth

century even the very rich and powerful were cold in winter and dirty all the time. Kings dressed in public, and received their friends while abed, and queens birthed their children in the presence of the court -- for the very practical purpose of preventing the substitution of another infant if a dead, deformed, or female infant was born who would endanger the royal line.

When students show interest in examining their own roots and genealogy, we should be tipped off that this analysis of their personal past, dealing as it mostly does, with modest folk is more interesting to students than concentration on the great ones as receptacles who hold and convey the history of a time. Let them examine the daily condition of our ancestors' lives in the pre-industrial world of the 1400-1800's. Not until I saw a pie graph, which indicated that 40% of the income of the peasants of Hesse in 1800 was used to purchase bread, did I realize why my own ancestor, a hundred years earlier, became an indentured servant, who paid off his passage to America by cutting trees in the Mohawk Valley. The lumber was purchased by an agent collecting materials to build the English ships that fought naval engagements of Queen Anne's war or, as it is often called, The War of the Spanish Succession. England's own trees had been destroyed to build the ships that for hundreds of years had kept England's wars at sea, away from home shores.

We can start where we are and use small classroom activities to turn our thought around. We can help students

to know that everything in which they are interested has a history and is a way into history -- everything from coins to cars. For instance, we can get children to look at the abstract of the land on which their house is built to start tracing the history of their community. And we can look at ways to organize history other than chronology, as we have already done in the other social sciences. Why is then-to-now a more valid stance for study of history than now-to-then? Convincing students of the relevance of what we teach may be more our problem of selecting what really is relevant than of difficulties with the resistance of learners.

And when we assign collateral reading, we can direct students to writings about ordinary folks instead of to stories of wars, battles and political figures. The books on life in Ancient Greece and Rome are readable by high schoolers, as is Life on a Medieval Barony. Let us create projects for individual work that will cause students to peer, not back at the past so much as into the depths of human life, into the documentation of small things that are the stuff of real history.

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